

The University of Chicago

THE PRESBYTERIAN AND
CONGREGATIONAL CONVENTION
OF WISCONSIN, 1840-50

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1938

By
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The Plan of Union adopted in 1801 by the General Association of Connecticut and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church was a memorable expression of the spirit of Christian unity in the face of a great missionary task. But its particular provisions for the working together of the Congregational and Presbyterian polities were little utilized. The "Accommodation Plan" adopted in 1808 was the main instrument of organization in the spirit of the Plan of Union. According to this a Congregational church, remaining such internally, might join a presbytery and be represented in the presbytery by its minister and a lay delegate. Such churches received the nickname "Presbygational", or were called "Plan of Union churches."

Under this arrangement, which was referred to both as the Plan of Union and the Accommodation Plan, the two systems worked together with great success in New York and the Great Lakes basin. Their co-operation reached Wisconsin about 1835.

The net effect was to advance Presbyterianism at the expense of Congregationalism. The former possessed a compact organization in which its members had a tenacious faith, while the latter were loosely organized and without denominational consciousness. This trend toward Presbyterianism is seen in New York where, in spite of the fact that most of the settlers were New England Congregationalists, there was not a single Congregational association by 1822, all overhead organizations being presbyteries.¹

But strict Presbyterians did not consider this to be in their favor, for there were modifications in the Plan of Union churches that did not meet their approval. By the 1820's, there was

¹ W. W. Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier: the Presbyterians* (New York, Harper and Brothers, 1936), 43.

a great deal of Presbyterian criticism of the "Presbygational" churches. Along with it went opposition to the missionary societies that supported work in Plan of Union territory.² Most of these were in New England and were composed of Congregationalists.³ In order to meet the demand for missionary work, many Presbyterians joined in the support of these and in founding other societies. When the agitation over the Plan of Union arose, the conservative or Old School party urged that Presbyterians abandon these voluntary societies and establish purely denominational work. In 1826, the Board of Missions (created in 1816) was reorganized for more effective work in the West. In this same year the American Home Missionary Society was organized, consisting of a number of voluntary societies, mostly Congregational, some Dutch Reformed interests, and the Domestic Missionary Society, an amalgamation of some Presbyterian societies working under the Plan of Union. Thus the lines came to be drawn between the Presbyterian Board of Missions representing the orthodox anti-Plan of Union elements, and the American Home Missionary Society representing Plan of Union Presbyterians.⁴

Dissatisfaction with the Plan of Union, then, resulted in an attack on the American Home Missionary Society. There were other complications, however, which ought to be mentioned. The conservative Presbyterians were afraid of Congregational innovations not only in church government, but also in theology. This was the period of the beginnings of the Unitarian movement in New England, along with improvements on Calvinism such as "Taylorism." Evidences of the "new divinity" in Plan of Union churches caused dismay among the rigid Presbyterians.⁵ In addition, there was the ever increasing question of slavery to cause division. New England abolitionism was coming into the "Presbygational" churches to annoy many Old School Presbyterians.⁶ The final result of these divisions of opinion

2 For instances see *Ibid.*, 100-102.

3 For an account of these see O. W. Elsbree, *The Rise of the Missionary Spirit in America, 1790-1815* (Williamsport, Pa., 1928).

4 See Sweet, *op. cit.*, 100-102; also W. O. Brackett, Jr., "The Rise of the New School in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. to the Reunion of 1869." *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, XIII (1928-9), 117ff.

5 See Brackett, *op. cit.*, 147; and Sweet, *op. cit.*, 107-110.

6 For a recent and penetrating study of the slavery issue in Presbyterianism, see Sweet, *op. cit.*, 111-122.

was that an Old School majority in the General Assembly of 1837 abrogated the Plan of Union in its entirety and excised from the church four New School synods and their presbyteries, churches, and members. The excised members and their sympathizers, almost half the church, the next year organized the "Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," asserting by taking this name that their church was the rightful continuation of the Presbyterian Church. This New School Church, having no other missionary interests, officially adopted the American Home Missionary Society.

But Congregationalists were by no means unanimously attached to the American Home Missionary Society. Coincidentally with the divisive trends in national psychology, Congregationalism belatedly began to develop a denominational consciousness. It had become increasingly clear that the Plan of Union operated to benefit Presbyterianism at Congregational expense. Consequently there arose a group of men, principally around Boston, who severely attacked Presbyterianism, the Plan of Union, and the American Home Missionary Society, and preached the gospel of the unique mission of Congregationalism. This party, which called itself the "Puritan" party, was strong enough by 1839 to establish as an organ of propaganda, the *New England Puritan*.

Opposition to the Plan of Union on the part of both Presbyterians and Congregationalists was thus fairly well developed by the decade of the forties. Those who supported it were New School Presbyterians and the less denominationally-minded Congregationalists who looked for their main support to the American Home Missionary Society. This group included the early missionaries in Wisconsin. Imbued with the ideals underlying the Plan of Union, they organized the Wisconsin union and made it function successfully at the time of bitterest attack. In time it was forced to succumb to the forces of denominationalism, but unlike its operation anywhere else, the Wisconsin union became Congregational.

An examination of the old manuscript record book of the Presbyterian and Congregational Convention of Wisconsin, the predecessor of the present Wisconsin Congrega-

tional Conference, reveals that the first organization was a presbytery. The organization of this presbytery, the Presbytery of Wisconsin, January 17, 1839, thus sets the date for the observance of the centennial of a state Congregational body! However, this presbytery was intended from the first to be a union body because, though all four ministers involved were Presbyterians, one of the two constituent churches was Congregational. Furthermore, definite provisions were made at the first meeting for the admission of other Congregational churches. The "Presbygational" basis of the Presbyterian churches is further evidenced by the provision that they might elect elders for terms.⁷

The second meeting of the little presbytery began on July 4, 1839. The first item was the admission to membership of Stephen Peet, of whom we shall speak later. At this time the name was changed to "Presbytery of Milwaukee" in order to reserve the more general name for a synod.⁸ At this session, steps also were taken to make the presbytery even more of a union body. The stated clerk (Peet) was instructed to draw up a letter inviting Congregationalists to send delegates to the next meeting of the presbytery, and a committee was appointed "to prepare articles of practice and rules for regulating Presbytery, based on principles embraced in the constitution of the Presbyterian church and the 'Plan of Union', and adapted to circumstances of the churches in the Territory."⁹ As a result of these actions, a number of Congregationalists were present at the next meeting which took place February 11, 1840. The presbytery adopted the articles of procedure submitted by the committee appointed at the previous session, articles allowing for the inclusion of Congregational churches and modifying the presbytery along the line of the "accommodation plan." The careful attention to system and order that is characteristic of Presbyterianism is shown by the action

7 "Minutes of the Regular and Special Sessions of the Presbytery of Wisconsin, 1839-1840, and of the Presbyterian and Congregational Convention of Wisconsin, 1840-1861," 25-28. (This is deposited with the Wisconsin Historical Society at Madison.)

8 Peet to the Secretaries of the American Home Missionary Society, August 13, 1839. In view of the fact that there were as yet only four ministerial members, the boldness of the vision of the presbytery is remarkable. (This letter, and those subsequently quoted, are in the files of the American Home Missionary Society and deposited in the Hammond Library of Chicago Theological Seminary.)

9 "Minutes," 29-33.

appointing a committee to prepare a Confession of Faith and select suitable hymns and psalms for the use of the newly organized frontier churches.¹⁰

At the fourth meeting, June 16, 1840, the presbytery took the momentous step of deciding to issue a formal invitation to the Congregationalists to attend a special meeting in order to consider an organic union.¹¹ It is apparent that the Presbyterians were almost desperately seeking to consummate the union at almost any cost, while the Congregationalists were not eager for it,¹² and were finally won over by the strenuous efforts of one of the Congregational ministers, Otis Curtis, who visited practically every church of that denomination in person.¹³ Perhaps the eagerness of the Presbyterians may be ascribed to the influence of a few men, such as Peet, whose original loyalty to the principle of union may have been enhanced by recent experiences, notably that of being forced out of the denomination and compelled to form a new one. This would likewise be true of the members of their churches. Another motive may have been the conscious or unconscious desire for survival in the face of an immigration that was increasingly Congregational in character. The considerations that influenced final acceptance by the Congregationalists are likewise obscure. Enough of them may have come from Plan of Union territory to turn the sentiment in favor of union.¹⁴ The fact that both denominations were alike dependent on the American Home Missionary Society undoubtedly made for the union. Nor should the fine spirit of Christian brotherhood that by all accounts pervaded the uniting session be neglected.

This session was held at Troy in a country school house beginning October 6, 1840. It was a special meeting of the presbytery and a special convention of the Congregationalists. After meeting separately, union was agreed upon in a joint session. As the record reads, "At length, after a very

10 *Ibid.*, 34-38.

11 *Ibid.*, 39-44. A printed copy of the letter sent out is inserted between pages 44 and 45.

12 D. A. Sherman to the A. H. M. S., December 17, 1840.

13 S. Peet, *History of the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches and Ministers in Wisconsin* (Milwaukee, 1851), 24.

14 The fact that many Congregationalists came from Plan of Union territory is explicitly stated and emphasized in the defense of Wisconsin that was drawn up to be sent to the *New England Puritan* in 1846 but never published. A copy is in the archives of Beloit College.

solemn & affecting season of prayer in which the Spirit of God evidently pervaded the convention, amendments were agreed upon and the general plan assented to."¹⁵ One of the stumbling-blocks was fear on the part of the Congregationalists that there would be too close overhead supervision. While the original proposition had been to admit Congregational churches and ministers to the presbytery on some basis following the "accommodation plan," the final decision was that the term "presbytery" be dropped and "convention" substituted. The convention was in time to become analogous to a synod or conference, when district conventions, analogous to presbyteries or consociations, would be established. In the use of these neutral terms, as well as in other minor matters, the Wisconsin union differed from previous union arrangements. It operated wholly in the field of overhead organization. The fundamental basis, according to Peet, was that individual churches were to be either strictly Presbyterian or strictly Congregational, not a mixture, and that the convention was to bear the same relationship to a given church as would a presbytery or consociation respectively. In relations between the convention and a Presbyterian church, the Book of Discipline was to be followed, and in relations with Congregational churches, the usages common in New England would be followed.¹⁶ It was a completely dual organization.

The formation of the union convention started a great movement of advance. The number of ministers and churches increased from a mere handful in 1840 to over a hundred in 1850. While the great preponderance of Congregational immigration caused three Congregational churches to be formed for every Presbyterian, the close, half-Presbyterian organization gave great effectiveness to the missionary work. In effect, Congregationalism in Wisconsin owes its prominence to the use of Presbyterian methods in the early days. Yet this extension would not have been possible without the backing of the American Home Missionary Society. The agent of this society from 1841 to 1848 was Stephen Peet, and because of the fact that

15 "Minutes," 47. Accounts of the meeting are scanty, only two outside the record being known to the writer, viz., Sherman to the A. H. M. S., December 17, 1840, and Jeremiah Porter to the A. H. M. S., October 27, 1840. The latter was published in the *Home Missionary*, but not exactly as Porter wrote it.

16 Peet, *op. cit.*, 36-39.

the agent was of strategic influence in the founding and growth of the new churches, and more especially because Peet happened to be a man of unusual vision and practical energy, the story of the Presbyterian and Congregational advance in the forties very largely revolves around him.

Peet was born in Vermont in 1797, but grew to manhood in northern Ohio. He graduated from Yale in 1823, spent a year at Princeton Theological Seminary, and graduated from Auburn in 1826. After serving as pastor of a Plan of Union Presbyterian church in Ohio, he became the agent of the Western Seaman's Friend Society and for four years worked among, and on behalf of, the sailors on the Great Lakes and Erie Canal. In 1837 he moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin, under a commission from the American Home Missionary Society.¹⁷

Peet's active mind told him that Wisconsin was entering upon a period of rapid development. He saw that the strategy of home missions should be to enter the field with the first settlements and grow with them. In contrast to the few who had preceded him, his interest and vision was not confined to one station, but literally took in the entire unformed state. He began almost at once to urge that more missionaries be sent. In June, 1839, he made a journey "for the purpose of survey and investigation," as he said, and, quite characteristically, "to put things right." He found many Presbyterians who would gladly organize churches if they could be assured of pastoral leadership. As he said a number of times in various ways, the country was fast filling up and now was the time to lay foundations.¹⁸

This tour of Stephen Peet was of great significance, not only in the history of Presbyterianism and Congregationalism, but in the general history of the state as well. On the basis of his journey, he wrote an article about Wisconsin which elicited great interest, especially in New England.¹⁹ Its effect as a stimulus to migration on the part of church people was no doubt in part responsible for the high type of immigrants who came to Wisconsin, though Peet's primary purpose was to induce support of missionaries.

17 There is no published biography of Peet, but the Rev. L. E. Murphy of Dubuque, Iowa, is now preparing one.

18 See especially his letters of March 29 and April 9, 1839.

19 *The Home Missionary and Pastors' Journal* (September, 1839), XII, 100.

As a natural result of his voluntary interest in Wisconsin as a whole, there grew up in Peet's mind the idea that a man should be commissioned as an agent to work in the territory at large. Under his influence, the little Presbytery of Milwaukee passed a resolution on July 5, 1839, asking for such an agent.²⁰ It seems apparent that Peet had himself in mind as the agent. In transmitting, as Stated Clerk, the resolution of the Presbytery, he remarked that some of the other missionaries had urged him to seek the pastorate of the Presbyterian church in Milwaukee recently vacated. He had at first rejected the suggestion, but on further reflection had concluded that with Milwaukee as his residence near the center of the missionary field, he could do much more in the surrounding country than from Green Bay.²¹ The American Home Missionary Society replied to the resolution that though the need for an agent was great, financial conditions made it absolutely impossible.²² On receipt of this intelligence, Peet accepted the call to Milwaukee, feeling it to be a special token of divine leadership that he would be able to act as an informal agent without expense to the Society. He wrote, "I am at liberty to spend a portion of the time . . . in your services, promoting the objects specified in the resolution of the Presbytery."²³

For two years, from 1839 to 1841, Peet labored at Milwaukee and journeyed out into the surrounding country a great deal. Two main objects stand out in his correspondence—to supply the growing number of churches with pastors, and to bring about the establishment of the full time agency. He was fired with the idea of the necessity for haste, not only to forestall other denominations, but to provide the facilities of religion before the new settlers should become lost to religion through preoccupation with material matters. Moreover, the door of opportunity was wide open. There were many places which "if seen and instructed" would raise funds for a minister. Peet's aid in revivals was repeatedly requested by the feeble churches. On account of the interest stimulated by his article in the *Home Mission-*

20 "Minutes," 33.

21 Peet to the A. H. M. S., August 13, 1839.

22 Badger to Peet, September 27, 1839. (Letter Book M, no. 94).

23 Peet to Badger, October 14, 1839.

ary, he was burdened with correspondence. Thus an agent was an imperative need.²⁴

As the financial crisis gradually passed away, the Home Missionary Society was able to commission more missionaries for Wisconsin. While only two came in 1839, eight came in 1840. They nearly all landed at Milwaukee and went to Peet for advice about securing fields—and, incidentally, for entertainment. The Society granted Peet a small additional sum to care for his added expenses, and in 1841, as a result of a combination of circumstances, invited him to become its agent for Wisconsin. One of these circumstances was the improvement in the state of the treasury. Other circumstances were those connected with the local situation at Milwaukee which forced Peet to resign his pastorate. These need not concern us here, except to say that Peet, acting sincerely according to his best judgment, opposed the formation of a Congregational church in Milwaukee. He felt it to be unwise to form a new church when the Presbyterian church was not self-supporting. However, some important people became alienated from him and accused him of a prejudice against Congregationalism. As a result, he redoubled his efforts to secure the agency. On April 10, 1841, without informing the Society of his local troubles, he wrote a letter entirely on the subject of the agency. Said he, "The present, I apprehend, is the most critical period in our history. We are in a forming state." The future of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism demanded that an agent be put on the field at once, for if help were not given, the settlers would turn to other denominations. On account of the source of immigration, Congregationalism and Presbyterianism were dominant, but they could not long remain so without help.²⁵

Whatever may have been Peet's personal motives, conscious or unconscious, the letter, as in the case of previous ones, showed a breadth of vision and a comprehension of strategy that was not lost upon the secretaries of the American Home Missionary Society, Charles Hall and Milton Badger. They replied that it had been decided to have an agent and asked if Peet would consider the office himself!²⁶

²⁴ Peet to Badger, April 10, 1840.

²⁵ Peet to the A. H. M. S., April 10, 1841.

²⁶ Badger to Peet, April 27, 1841.

Peet immediately replied in the affirmative.²⁷ He lost no time in getting about the business of the agency, though his formal appointment did not begin until June 1, 1841, and he did not receive official notification until the middle of the month. For seven years, then, until March 1, 1848, this capable and energetic pioneer journeyed by all sorts of conveyances in all sorts of weather back and forth over the southern portion of the present Wisconsin. One of the missionaries aptly referred to him in a letter to the Society as "your indefatigable agent."²⁸ While we cannot here follow his movements in detail, we may summarize his policies.

First of all, the freedom from a pastorate enabled Peet to extend greatly his exploration of religious conditions. In some ways this was his greatest contribution, for through him the American Home Missionary Society was able to get first hand competent and confidential information about missionary points. Peet was never a man to mince words, and some of his remarks about places and men were decidedly caustic. His first report as agent listed eight places which he had visited and characterized each of them in concise terms. Thus of Whitewater he said, "The place is growing, and will soon become an important interior village, having good water power & a fine farming country around." He remarked that preaching should be maintained there all the time, that the people had subscribed three hundred dollars and asked one hundred and fifty dollars aid. Of Prairie du Lac (now Milton) he said, "Rev. Dan'l Smith preaches here. They receive 50 Dollars from Amherst Mass. in aid of supporting the gospel."²⁹

Peet was always on the alert for the opportunity to organize new churches. Out of the ninety-two in existence at the termination of his agency, Peet was responsible for the organization of twenty-eight.³⁰ Undoubtedly he was indirectly instrumental in the organization of many others. While no doubt many of these churches would have been organized in time, the availability of an agent for counsel and advice acted as encouragement, and many times the uninvited visit of the dynamic agent became a provocation

²⁷ Peet to Badger, May 12, 1841.

²⁸ J. C. Holbrook to the A. H. M. S., January 16, 1843.

²⁹ Peet to Badger, July 15, 1841.

³⁰ These figures gleaned from Peet, *op. cit.*, 93-172.

to organization, especially as he often came armed with prospects of pastoral leadership and financial assistance.

Technically, the main function of the missionary agents was to recommend from the field amounts to be granted in aid to churches. Where there was an agent, churches made application to him, and he transmitted the application to New York with his recommendation. Peet was an excellent man for this business. He felt that churches should receive the minimum of aid in order that they might become self-supporting as soon as possible. But while he was very economical with the funds of the Society, he knew when to be generous. Thus, for example, he subsidized heavily the feeble and struggling church at Madison because of its location in the capital of the territory. This financial function was at best a difficult one, one in which a man could easily make enemies; accordingly, Peet welcomed the suggestion that a Board of Agency be established which should pass on all financial matters. After considerable correspondence, the Society finally appointed a board consisting of the Congregational and Presbyterian pastors in Milwaukee, a layman from each of these churches, and the agent. It was an able Board and in no sense a rubber stamp for Peet, as it was accused of being. Its individual members were all active and visited many of the frontier churches with Peet or on their own account. The board got into action on December 12, 1843.³¹

Another important service of Agent Peet was in connection with problems of missionary personnel. It was he who corresponded with prospective candidates, who received them when they arrived, who sent them to churches in need of pastors, and who judged the effectiveness of their work when the time came each year for the renewal of their commissions. Some of the missionaries found in him a friend and brother or a "father in Israel," but it is notable that these were for the most part the more energetic and capable. He was a dynamo of energy himself and such a man is apt to be impatient with slower and less able men. In a number of instances Peet got into trouble on account of his harsh judgment of men, in some instances justified, in others unjustified. He had no use for lazy missionaries, but he forgot

³¹ Peet to Badger as follows; November 10, 1842, May 3, August 25, November 22, and December 12, 1843.

that even lazy missionaries had friends. He was unduly critical, especially of new recruits, and gave the impression of being dictatorial. It was in the field of personal relationships that he was least successful. Not only was he at times tactless, but his judgment of men was not always sound, as in the case of David Sherman, an elderly man whose coming Peet opposed and resented, but who became the beloved patriarch of the whole cause in six months. Yet in spite of his shortcomings, it is to Peet that Wisconsin owes the high character of its foundation builders. Inferior men were cleverly discouraged from coming or deftly steered off into other territories if they did come.

One of the problems which loomed large was the maintenance of doctrinal integrity. In those days denominations stood for distinctive types of thought and practice. The lines between them were sharply drawn, and any deviation from the pattern was a real danger to the progress of the denomination. It was especially true in the West, where a great variety of "isms" and religious systems were bidding for acceptance by the fluctuating western mind, that each denomination should guard its distinctiveness and unity. This necessity Peet perceived more clearly than anyone else. It accounts for his almost fanatical support of the Presbyterian and Congregational Convention which united the Calvinistic groups. It is responsible for his careful guard against the admission of men of divergent views. It was the cause of his desire to keep the peace and avoid controversy.³²

But to keep peace and avoid controversy was precisely what was impossible in the "roaring forties." Two matters in particular arose to cause dissension, slavery and a type of thought which in the West was known as "Oberlinism." Slavery, which is now known to have had more to do with the split in Presbyterianism than was formerly supposed,³³ began to agitate Wisconsin religious circles as early as 1841. In that year the Convention passed resolutions condemning it as a sin.³⁴ The matter came up in subsequent sessions quite regularly. There were numerous agitations throughout the territory and many anti-slavery societies were formed in which missionaries took leading parts. The American Home

³² Peet to Badger, February 24, 1845.

³³ See Sweet, *op. cit.*, 111-122.

³⁴ "Minutes," 75.

Missionary Society was criticized by some for supporting slaveholders in the South. But while the Convention was apparently unanimous in support of abolition, its policy was to avoid extremes and the stirring up of bitter controversy. Every resolution was accompanied by a warning to this effect. Thus, in 1846, the Convention declared categorically that the anti-slavery cause was "a part of the gospel of Christ" but went on to state that it is "liable to be abused."³⁵ This attitude the eastern radicals could not understand and attacked the Wisconsin men on the ground of a lack of interest in the cause. In defending himself, Peet declared that he would be ashamed not to be an abolitionist, but the missionary work was too important to be ruined by controversy.³⁶

Wisconsin missionaries were also attacked because they were said to be "Oberlinists." This was a variety of Finney perfectionism, a sort of Pelagianism that was too much for Calvinists to swallow. The charge came principally from New School Presbyterians in Ohio, invented, as Peet thought, by one of his personal enemies, an incompetent man whom he had not especially encouraged to settle in Wisconsin. There is ample evidence that there was no region where the charge of "Oberlinism" was less applicable than Wisconsin, where only one or possibly two men held Oberlin views, neither of them aggressively.³⁷ Yet the charge was played up for a while and contributed to the criticism of the union.

These matters of controversy had an indirect part in the downfall of Peet and the disruption of the union, but the direct attack came from the ultra-Congregational "Puritan" party in New England. This came to a head in 1845. In the summer of that year a certain Boston merchant by the name of M. F. Wood had occasion to make a business trip through several western states. In Wisconsin, he apparently fell in with some of the people whom Peet had alienated. At any rate, he came to the conclusion that the union Convention and Peet were actually working for Presbyterianism to the damage of his beloved Congregationalism. Accordingly, under the pseudonym of "Boston Lay-

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁶ Peet to Badger, February 24, 1845.

³⁷ *Ibid.* This letter is Peet's long defense of his policies.

man," he wrote a letter of protest to the *New England Puritan*.³⁸ It had always been the policy of the American Home Missionary Society to refrain from public reply to attack and try to set matters right privately. In this case, Joseph S. Clark, of the auxiliary Massachusetts Home Missionary Society, was able to convince Wood that he had received false impressions in the West and to secure his promise of a letter for the *Puritan* to that effect.³⁹ Meanwhile, Stephen Peet, greatly incensed by the letter, impetuously wrote an elaborate defense.⁴⁰ The result was that Wood refused to make any retraction and continued the public controversy with Peet in which others participated.

The American Home Missionary Society was greatly embarrassed by all this. Peet had been bluntly ordered to keep silent, but too late.⁴¹ However, in the summer of 1846, Parsons Cooke, one of the editors of the *Puritan*, engaged in a crusade through the West to preach the distinctive nature of Congregationalism and pronounce a solemn warning against the Presbyterians. Among other places, he was given a ready hearing in the Congregational church in Milwaukee where Peet was not at all popular, and apparently picked up additional complaints against the agent. On his return, he editorially attacked Peet and Wisconsin missionaries in their union Convention. This blast stirred the missionaries to draw up a formal reply and defense of themselves and Peet, apparently without the latter's knowledge.⁴² They entrusted Aaron Lucius Chapin with the duty of sending it to be published in the *Puritan*.

But it was never published. Chapin, who was an unusually sane and level-headed man, shortly afterwards, at the age of 33, refused the post of secretary of the American Home Missionary Society in order to accept the presidency of Beloit College. He was pastor of the Presbyterian church in Milwaukee and a member of the Board of Agency. While he had helped circulate the defense document for signatures, he had not fully approved of it.⁴³ Whether by accident or de-

38 *The New England Puritan*, (October 30, 1845), VI.

39 Clark to Hall, November 6, 1845.

40 *Puritan*, (January 1, 1846), VII.

41 Hall to Peet, December 13, 1845.

42 A copy of this is preserved among the Chapin papers in the archives of Beloit College.

43 Chapin to Badger, December 14, 1846.

sign, Chapin did not send it directly to the *Puritan*, but to Clark of the Massachusetts society. Furthermore, he sent copies to Badger and Hall in New York. There it fell like a bombshell and caused a near panic. Badger rushed out to the telegraph, then just established, to prevent Clark from sending it to the *Puritan*. To the secretaries, it looked as if they were in the dilemma of either alienating their entire missionary force in an important area or a large group of their financial supporters in New England. They chose to keep the unity of their supporters and risk their ability to explain matters to the Wisconsin missionaries.⁴⁴ Their point was that Cooke would be forced into a defense and that he would certainly believe Peet to be really at the bottom of the defense document. A long letter to the missionaries by the beloved senior secretary, Dr. Hall, explained the attitude of the secretaries and completely satisfied the former.⁴⁵

The crisis was over, but it was perfectly evident that, regardless of the truth or falsity of the accusations against him, Peet was an embarrassment to the American Home Missionary Society. Chapin, probably Peet's best friend, realized that his usefulness was at an end.⁴⁶ The Society waited a number of months, probably in the hope that Peet would resign of his own accord, but the agent stubbornly clung to his position. He was fighting for the ideal of Presbyterian-Congregational unity which to him transcended personal considerations, and he felt that the Society would support him. Finally, Dr. Badger wrote to request his resignation.⁴⁷ Peet never recovered from the blow. Though too big a man to show open resentment or ill will, he never ceased to feel that the Society, to which he had given the best years of his life in unswerving loyalty, had deserted him and the cause of Christian unity. He gave up his post March 1, 1848, and then became the financial agent for Beloit College for a time. Broken in health from his strenuous life, he retired for a time and then moved to Batavia, Illinois, and died an untimely death in 1855, following a hard trip through the

44 Badger to Clark, November 18, 1846.

45 Hall to Chapin, November 23, 1846: Chapin to Hall, December 14, 1846: J. Lewis to Hall, March 9, 1847.

46 Chapin to Badger, November 22, 1847.

47 Badger to Peet, July 15, 1847.

East, undertaken for the purpose of raising the funds to insure the founding of Chicago Theological Seminary.

The resignation of Stephen Peet from the agency of the American Home Missionary Society in Wisconsin really marks the end of the Presbyterian and Congregational union. To be sure, in 1848 it was as strong as it had ever been, but the forced resignation of its aggressive champion under pressure from outside was a clear indication of what was sure to follow. The union was directly against the trends of the times and without the artificial stimulation of Peet's energy and personality nature was allowed to take its course. With opinion throughout New England against union as it was, it was inevitable that in time this sentiment should grow in Wisconsin. This was first noticeable along the lake shore, that part of Wisconsin in closest touch with the East. It was noticeably strong in 1848.⁴⁸ The Milwaukee Congregational church, long unfriendly to Peet, was the center of this sentiment, its pastor, J. J. Miter, never having been wholly willing to cooperate with the Presbyterians.⁴⁹ The splitting off of a group of members of this church in 1847 to form a radical anti-slavery church, the Free Congregational, indicates at least the fact that contemporary New England sentiments were making themselves felt in Wisconsin. The same is evidenced in Beloit in the formation of the Presbyterian church in 1849 for the same reason.

While in other parts of the West the Plan of Union worked for the benefit of Presbyterianism, in Wisconsin the opposite was the result. There it was not the Congregationalists who seceded from the union, but the Presbyterians. This was due to the fact that, on account of immigration, Congregationalism was overwhelmingly predominant. In 1840, when the Convention was organized, it included eight Presbyterian and eight Congregational churches.⁵⁰ In 1850, there were ninety-five Congregational and thirty-one Presbyterian churches.⁵¹ A closer examination of the list reveals the added disparity in the fact that all but three of the Presbyterian churches were very small in membership. Thus

48 B. H. Camp to Badger and Hall, January 27, 1848.

49 Peet to Badger, August 25, 1843.

50 Peet, *op. cit.*, 28.

51 *Ibid.*, 183-186.

while it was union in sentiment and in theory, the Convention had become really Congregational.

Nothing shows this any better than the fact that the actual defections were Presbyterian, and that the first secession was led by the Presbyterian church in Milwaukee, the church of which Peet and Chapin had been pastors, the most important and most faithful church in the entire Convention. This was caused by resentment against Chapin's leaving to become president of Beloit College, for which the church blamed the Convention, and by the leadership of Chapin's successor, a more rigid Presbyterian from the East, William H. Spencer. Under Spencer's leadership, this church withdrew from the Convention in 1851, and with a small newly-organized Presbyterian church, formed a second Milwaukee Presbytery and affiliated with the New School Synod of Peoria.⁵² Later in the same year, three Presbyterian members of the Convention induced two small churches to form the Fox River Presbytery. In 1856 the Presbytery of Columbus was set up and in 1857 the Synod of Wisconsin was created.⁵³

This Presbyterian movement did not mean that the Convention was destroyed, but that it became Congregational. Only a very small number of Presbyterian churches belonging to the Convention went over to the Synod, but all newly organized Presbyterian churches naturally affiliated with it, especially after 1857, when the New School Church Extension Committee sent an agent to do missionary work in Wisconsin. Of the forty churches in the Synod in 1860, only four had belonged to the Convention. During the decade of the fifties, the Convention added one hundred and one churches, about doubling its membership. Of these, ninety-four were Congregational, seven Presbyterian, and it is to be noted that only one of the latter was organized after 1855. Yet while it had become Congregational in fact, the Convention kept the union principle in theory. In 1874 it recognized facts to the extent of reversing the denomina-

52 W. F. Brown, *Past Made Present* (1900), 148-150. It should be noted that the Old School Presbyterians began work in Wisconsin in 1845 and had 22 churches by 1850. They had no relation to the Convention. In 1851 they formed the Synod of Wisconsin. The present Synod of Wisconsin dates its origin from this rather than from the New School Synod.

53 Wisconsin Synod, "Records of the Presbyterian Church in Wisconsin, 1857-1883." Three manuscript volumes deposited with the Wisconsin Historical Society at Madison.

tions in its name, calling itself the "Congregational and Presbyterian Convention of Wisconsin." Ten years later the Convention became the "Congregational Convention of Wisconsin," and a new constitution was adopted in 1887.

Thus the enlightened union plan came to an end, not by any deliberate rejection, but by the slow process of time. The highminded Wisconsin Christians could not have resisted the social and religious trends even had they been fully aware of them. It was a gallant gesture, the spirit of which is still present after the first hundred years. It is still a fact that the present Wisconsin Congregational Conference owes its strength largely to the vision and energy of Presbyterians like Stephen Peet, Aaron Chapin, and Jeremiah Porter, and celebrates its centennial dating from the organization of a presbytery. That both Presbyterians and Congregationalists do not celebrate their centennials from the same event is not the fault of the pioneers, who would have had it so, but to the inexorable social forces that changed wilderness to civilization.

